**Violence of Non-Violence**
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John Thompson

# *Ahimsā* and its Ambiguities: Reading the story of Buddha and Aṅgulimāla

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the story of the Buddha's encounter with Angulimāla, a vicious brigand who, subdued by the Buddha, renounces his outlaw ways for the monastic life, eventually attaining *arahant* status. The tale of Angulimāla has proven quite popular in Buddhist history and is often cited as evidence of how under the Dhamma no one is beyond salvation. Yet this story poses problems for our understanding and as such, has been repeatedly (sometimes radically) re-interpreted over the years. Taking my cue from literary theorists, I maintain that these retellings encourage us to read the story in its various incarnations as an on-going narrative struggle with issues surrounding violence, suggesting a fundamental ambivalence towards violence (and the much-touted virtue of *ahiṃsā*). Such struggles become even clearer when we compare Aṅgulimāla to another storied Buddhist figure, Asoka Maurya. While perhaps discomforting to those seeking for those seeking a Buddhist basis for rejecting violence, it may be that embracing such ambivalence points towards a more realistic ethic for our world.

**Keywords:** *ahiṃsā*, ambiguity, Aṅgulimāla, Asoka, interpretation, narrative, violence

*Those who harm me come against me,*
*Summoned by my own evil karma.*
*But they will be the ones who go to hell,*
*And so it is myself who brings their ruin.*
The *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Chapter 6, v. 47

Despite clichéd descriptions of Buddhism as a "religion of peace," the actual reality is far more complex. An important recent development in the study of Buddhism has been the increasing attention to violence in the religion, as exemplified in the various essays included in Michael Zimmermann's *Buddhism and Violence*, or monographs such as Michael Jerryson's *Buddhist Fury*, and Brian Victoria's *Zen at War*. At that same time it is undeniable that *ahiṃsā* ("non-harming") remains a guiding ethical principle in Buddhism and that some of today's most venerated advocates for peace (the Dalai Lama, Aung San Ssu Kyi, Thich Nhat Hanh) are Buddhists. This apparent contradiction goes back to the life story of the historical Buddha – prophesied to be either a world conquering king (*cakkavatin*) or an enlightened sage who conquers *saṁsāra*. There seems to be an inherent, perhaps irresolvable, tension here at the very heart of Buddhism. Rather than focus on history (as the above-mentioned works do), however, in this essay I examine how Buddhism deals with issues of violence and *ahiṃsā* through narrative, focusing on the story of Buddha's encounter with Aṅgulimāla, a vicious brigand who renounces his outlaw ways for monastic life. I begin by examining issues surrounding *ahiṃsā* in Buddhism before relating the core story of the Buddha and Aṅgulimāla to show how it challenges mainstream Buddhist doctrine. I then discuss narrative as "an ambiguous way of knowing" that readily lends itself to the tradition's struggles with such sticky doctrinal issues.

***Corresponding author: John Thompson:** Christopher Newport University

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The tale of Aṅgulimāla, like many religious stories, has been repeatedly (sometimes radically) re-interpreted over the years. Taking my cue from literary theorists, I maintain that these retellings encourage us to read the story in its various incarnations as an on-going narrative struggle with issues surrounding violence, suggesting a fundamental ambivalence towards violence (and the much-touted virtue of *ahiṃsā*). Such struggles become even clearer when we compare Aṅgulimāla to another storied Buddhist figure, Asoka Maurya (r. 274-236 BCE). Comparing the tales of Aṅgulimāla and Asoka highlights irresolvable tensions surrounding *ahiṃsā* that lie at the very heart of Buddhism. I argue, though, that embracing such ambivalence, while discomforting for those seeking a Buddhist basis for rejecting violence (i.e. pacifism), points towards a more realistic ethic for our world.

## *Ahiṃsā* and Aṅgulimāla

*Ahiṃsā* has been a primary ethical principle in Buddhism from its beginnings and remains so to this day. It is the first of the five basic precepts that all Buddhists should live by,[1] and by and large this encourages a peaceful lifestyle. Generally speaking, inflicting injury is wrong and should be avoided. However, in practice, Buddhists observe *ahiṃsā* to varying degrees. For instance, most Buddhists (lay or monastic) have not been vegetarian. Historically, there is evidence that *ahiṃsā* emerged among *samaṇa* (lit. "strivers," renunciates) movements that rejected the Vedic *ethos* governing ancient India, a religious political order centering on ritual sacrifice (*yajña*) and a strict social hierarchy. Over time, however, *śramana* ideas and practices influenced mainstream society, becoming modified themselves in the process. Thus it seems that for rulers, acting in accord with *ahiṃsā* could include using force to maintain order, defend the state, and even the Dhamma.[2] Moreover, there was increasing latitude in observing *ahiṃsā* in the political and social sphere as Buddhism spread beyond the Indian region.[3]

Grammatically, *ahiṃsā* is the negative form of the Sanskrit *hiṃsā*, "to desire to harm," thus, *ahiṃsā* might be better translated as "not desiring to harm," an idea that opens the possibility of initially harmful but ultimately beneficial actions being in accord with *ahiṃsā*.[4] Certainly adherence to *ahiṃsā* has varied over time, and with the rise of Mahāyāna and its corresponding emphasis on *karuṇā* ("compassion") and *upāya-kauśalya* ("skillful means"), violence became more acceptable in certain situations. Theoretically, bodhisattvas aspiring to full enlightenment could be justified in committing violence with the understanding that they accept the "karmic price" for their actions.[5]

It is just this centrality (and ambiguity) surrounding *ahiṃsā* in Buddhist history that makes the tale of the Buddha and Aṅgulimāla so intriguing. Much as we see in stories from other religions (e.g. Jesus' feeding of the five thousand),[6] so there are variations of the tale of Aṅgulimāla in Buddhism. The story is perhaps most famous in Theravāda tradition, although even here there is no single coherent version. The Pali canon, purportedly the oldest of the surviving collections of Buddhist scripture, refers to Aṅgulimāla in several places. Of these, the oldest is probably verses 866-91 of the *Theragāthā* ("Verses of the Elders"), a collection of hymns attributed to some of the Buddha's earliest disciples. These verses celebrating the murderer-turned-monk's awakening, however, only obliquely refer to events in his life. The *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*, a sermon found in the *Majjhima Nikāya* ("Middle Length Discourses"), a collection of early Buddhist discourses, presents a more developed narrative and includes verses from the *gāthā*. In addition, Aṅgulimāla is also referred to in the *Mahāvagga* ("Great Chapter"), a text discussing monastic discipline, and several *Jātakas*,

**1** The five precepts are refraining from causing unnecessary harm (*ahimsā*), refraining from stealing, refraining from harmful speech, refraining from "illicit" sexual activity, and refraining from the consuming of intoxicants.

**2** Zimmerman, "Only a Fool," 213-242.

**3** For a critical examination of *ahimsā* in the greater Indic cultural sphere see Houben and Kooj, *Violence Denied*.

**4** Jerryson, "Introduction," 6. A classic example is a doctor cutting off a poisoned finger, a painful, even traumatic procedure that nonetheless is necessary to preserve a person's life. Thus, the action is in accord with *ahimsā* since it prevents a far larger harm.

**5** Zimmerman, "War," 894.

**6** See Matthew14: 13-21, Mark 6: 32-44, Luke 9: 10b-17, and John 6: 1-15.

stories of the Buddha's previous lives.[7] Later non-canonical texts, the *Papañcasudani*, a commentary on the *Majjhima Nikāya* attributed to the scholar-monk Buddhaghoṣa (5th century C.E.), and the *Paramattha-dipani*, a commentary on the *Theragāthā* by Dhammapāla (6th century C.E.), expand upon the *sutta* version, adding various details. Other Pali texts that speak of Aṅgulimāla include the *Milinda-pañhā* ("Questions of King Milinda") and the *Mahāvaṃsa* ("Great Chronicle"), a legendary history of Sri Lanka. In addition, there are several versions of the tale of Aṅgulimāla in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, the standard modern edition of the Chinese canon,[8] as well as a variant preserved in a fragmentary manuscript of the *Saṃyuktāgama* ("Kindred Sayings"), a Sanskrit text attributed to the Mūlasarvāstivāda School.[9]

With such a tangled skein of narrative threads, it is virtually impossible to make a definitive claim for the earliest version of the story. Art Historian Monika Zin speculates that the southern (Pali) and northern versions of the story derive from a common canonical text which has not survived.[10] By contrast, in reconstructing the historical background of the story, Richard F. Gombrich, a scholar of Theravāda Buddhism, suggests that the *sutta* version from the Pali canon is the oldest (although narratively quite problematic), adding, "It [the *sutta*] did not satisfy the tradition, and the commentators supplied a full background story."[11] Following Gombrich, I propose that we read the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*, the simplest and most jarring version of the tale, as the early "core" story that gets expanded by later interpreters as Buddhism develops into a more established and institutionalized religion.[12]

## The "Core" Story

One day while the Buddha is residing at the Jetta Grove outside Savatthi, he learns of a bloodthirsty highway man terrorizing the region. This man is called Aṅgulimāla ("Garland of Fingers") for his habit of wearing a garland/necklace (*mālā*) of some 1000 severed fingers (*aṅguli*) taken from his many victims. The villagers warn the Buddha during his morning begging rounds that the brigand has attacked and slain many people (including large parties of armed men), but the Blessed One, heedless of the danger, ventures off into the forest alone.

The sharp-eyed killer spies the Buddha from afar and is surprised that a lone monk should wander into his domain when he has destroyed larger groups. True to his nature, he gathers up his arms and charges after the Buddha, intent on dispatching this foolish holy man easily. However, things don't go as he planned. The Buddha, apparently well aware of Aṅgulimāla's approach, uses his "psychic powers" (*iddhi*) to stay out of harm's reach; he continues calmly walking yet Aṅgulimāla, though running with all his might, cannot catch up. In frustration he halts and calls out, "Stop, contemplative! Stop!" The Buddha replies, "I *have* stopped, Aṅgulimāla. *You* stop." Aṅgulimāla is amazed – not only has the Buddha evaded his clutches, he has spoken nonsense by commanding Aṅgulimāla to stop when the killer has already done so while claiming that he (Buddha) has stopped when he clearly has continued walking. Aṅgulimāla asks what he means, and the Buddha explains,

> I have stopped, Aṅgulimāla,
> once & for all,
> having cast off violence
> toward all living beings.
> You, though,
> are unrestrained toward beings.
> That's how I've stopped
> and you haven't.[13]

**7** See Mahāvagga I.41 and Jātaka 537.

**8** See the *Angulimālīya Sūtra* or *Yangjuemolou jing*, T. 120. This version was translated into Chinese by the translator monk Gunabhadra, 435-443 CE. There are also two earlier versions in the *Taishō*, the *Yang juemo jing*, T.118, attributed to Dharmarakṣa, 226-313 CE, and the *Yang jue ji jing*, T.119, translated by Fa Zhu, 290-307 CE.

**9** One of the various sects located in northern India.

**10** Zin, "The Unknown," 708.

**11** Gombrich, "Who was Aṅgulimāla?" 137. Gombrich concludes that the tale relates an encounter between the Buddha and a follower of Śiva or a devotee of *śakti* tantra.

**12** Summarized from the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*. For an English translation see Thanissaro, *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*.

**13** Ibid., 2.

The Buddha's words have an immediate effect: Aṅgulimāla declares that he will give up his evil ways, tosses his weapons aside, bows, and requests to become a monk. The Buddha accepts, and together they return to the Jeta grove to join the rest of the *sangha*. Aṅgulimāla commits himself diligently to the monastic path, proving to be a model monk. This new monk is so virtuous that he even wins the admiration of King Pasenadi, the regional ruler who had come with his guard to capture the bandit and execute him for his crimes. In fact, the king even offers to pay for Aṅgulimāla's upkeep; the devout monk, ever correct, declines.

Aṅgulimāla continues to devote himself to monastic life and, through his great merit and sincerity (with the Buddha's guidance) even heals a woman in danger of dying while in labor. Following the Buddha's instructions, Aṅgulimāla performs a "truth act" (*satyakiriyā*), declaring that his present life of purity and harmlessness will henceforth be a means for bringing health and well-being for the mother and her child. In so doing, Aṅgulimāla establishes a protection ritual (*paritta*) that is still used in Theravādin societies to bless pregnant women and to protect new houses from evil forces.

Later, Aṅgulimāla retires to the forest where he devotes himself to rigorous asceticism, and soon attains "the supreme goal of the holy life," becoming an *arahant*, the highest spiritual level in early Buddhism. Sometime after this, the *sutta* relates that one morning while on his begging rounds, he is attacked (presumably by villagers who recognize him although the text does not say). After being struck by clods of earth, rocks, and potsherds, Aṅgulimāla returns to the Buddha, "his head broken open and dripping with blood, his bowl broken, and his outer robe ripped to shreds."[14] The Buddha comforts the wounded *bhikkhu*, exhorting him to bear with it and explaining that Aṅgulimāla is now experiencing the fruit of the bad karma from his previous violent deeds – karma that otherwise would have burned him "in hell for many years, many hundreds of years, many thousands of years."[15]

The last section of the *sutta* speaks of Aṅgulimāla going into seclusion and experiencing the "bliss of release," and then spontaneously breaking into verse – the same verses found in the *Theragāthā* (Thag 16.8 – verses 866-91) which allude to various in Aṅgulimāla's life, both before and after his conversion. Celebrating his change to a non-violent life, the monk proclaims himself "Ahiṃsaka" ("Doer of No Harm"), singing,

> A bandit
> I used to be,
> renowned as Aṅgulimāla.
> Swept along by a great flood,
> I went to the Buddha as refuge. . .
>
> This has come well & not gone away,[16]
> it was not badly thought through for me.
> The three knowledges
> have been attained;
> the Buddha's bidding,
> done.[17]

And so this remarkable tale ends on a most appropriate note.

Understandably, this redemption story has proven popular with Buddhists of all stripes. Two of the greatest pilgrims in Buddhist history, Faxian (337- c. 422 CE) and Xuanzang (602-664), certainly knew the story of the ex-murderer *arahant*, and write of visiting sites associated with his life.[18] Over the centuries mainstream Buddhist tradition developed a more complex backstory for Aṅgulimāla, adding details such as his being born under a "bad sign" (the "thieves constellation") and being forced to his life of crime by his jealous guru. Some versions add another character, Aṅgulimāla's mother, to the mix, having her venture into the forest to bring her murderous son some food and thereby almost becoming one of his victims. The

**14** Ibid., 5.
**15** Ibid.
**16** Presumably referring to the bliss and peace of *nibbāna*.
**17** Thanissaro, *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*, 5-7.
**18** Legge, *A Record*, 56 and Beal, *The Life*, 93.

Buddha here becomes even more heroic, as he not subdues the blood-thirsty bandit but also saves him from the unpardonable sin of matricide. Such retellings heighten the drama but in the process smooth out the tale's rough edges, bringing it more into accord with Buddhist doctrine.[19] The end result tends to confirm mainstream teachings but lacks the imaginative tension characteristic of more challenging (and "better") versions. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this simplifying process are the many children's versions of the story currently available online.[20]

The story of Aṅgulimāla has been interpreted very creatively in Mahāyāna circles, particularly in East Asia. For instance, the Tiantai patriarch Zhiyi (538-597) claims that even Aṅgulimāla's "violence" merely reflects Ultimate Compassion, while the later thinker Zhanran (711-782) writes that Aṅgulimāla "displayed the Dharma-gate by which to benefit others." The Japanese Tendai commentator Annen (841-889) even says, "Aṅgulimāla's action should not be considered violations of the precepts on taking life."[21] Unlike traditional Theravādin readings, these Mahāyāna readings present a view from the perspective of the Ultimate, where allegedly the dualities of "good versus evil" do not hold.

In addition to these written texts and commentaries, over the centuries the story of Aṅgulimāla has been depicted in various artistic forms (paintings, sculpted reliefs etc.), several of which are masterpieces that can be found at important Buddhist sites or in museum collections.[22] The story has also been the basis for at least three movies, the most recent of which is an Indian production completed in 2014. Interestingly, the unsettling aspects of Aṅgulimāla's story were at the heart of a controversy surrounding the 2003 Thai movie "Ongkulimal" (the Thai rendering of Aṅgulimāla): the film was protested by conservative Buddhist activists (and eventually censored) for following the *sutta* rather than popular versions that conform more easily with orthodox Buddhist ethical doctrine.[23]

The story of the Buddha and Aṅgulimāla strikes a chord with its various audiences (both past and present), and it is little wonder that people have been drawn to it over the centuries. Certainly on the surface this story appears to be a basic morality tale in which the Buddha calmly subdues Aṅgulimāla, thereby ending his criminal career and restoring peace to the region. Furthermore, the Buddha converts the murderer to Buddhism and entices him into the monastic life. The peaceful yet disciplined life of a *bhikkhu* proves to be the ex-criminal's true vocation, as Aṅgulimāla eventually achieves *arahant* status. Thus we have a compelling demonstration of the power of *ahiṃsā* confirmed in a tale portraying the triumph of the monk over the murderer – a triumph that also shows the gentle path of rehabilitation as more effective than punishment. The redemption of Aṅgulimāla is often cited as evidence of how under the Dhamma no one is beyond salvation, hence this story offers hope to all by suggesting that *ahiṃsā* ultimately wins the day. In fact, the tale has inspired a successful and growing Buddhist prison ministry in the United Kingdom.[24] What could be better?

However, this simple framing of the story begins to collapse when we examine certain details. To cite just a few: the Buddha overrides the authority of King Pasenadi in shielding Aṅgulimāla from legal punishment for his crimes, Aṅgulimāla never apologizes or offers recompense to the families of his victims, the karmic retribution visited on Aṅgulimāla (a physical beating at the hands of some villagers), while violent, seems rather lenient considering the hundreds of people he murdered. Mahāyāna version(s) present the tale with a slight doctrinal twist, as an occasion for Buddha to preach the teaching of *tathāgatagarbha* ("womb/embryo of Buddhahood"), but do not resolve such narrative problems. It seems that this story poses so many challenges that over the years people have reworked it as part of an effort to "make sense" of a confusing

**19** This more "tamed" version is the basis for Helmuth Hecker's "Angulimala: A Murderer's Road." More recently G.K. Ananda Kumarasiri has published a detailed version of Aṅgulimāla story replete with colorful illustrations and intended for a popular audience. This is very much a "Sunday-school" version similar to Hecker's albeit greatly expanded, and he weaves in his didactic comments, even adding reflections on the lessons taught by the story and a list of questions for discussion (pp. 75-79). See Kumarasiri, *Angulimāla*.

**20** See, for example, "The Story of Aṅgulimāla."

**21** Kleine, "Evil Monks" 87-88.

**22** For a review of some of the artworks depicting Aṅgulimāla see Zin, "The Unknown," 704-713.

**23** *Bangkok Post*, "Movie Based on Buddhist Teachings needs New Title," April 2, 2003. The movie was re-edited and eventually released in 2004.

**24** See "Aṅgulimāla: The Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy."

welter of facts and events. This fact suggests that narrative in of itself can be a way of knowing, albeit one that does not necessarily conform to linear, logical reasoning.

## Story – an ambiguous way of knowing

It is easy to overlook in most scholarly analyses of violence and *ahiṃsā* that perhaps *the* major source for guidance on the subject are the myriads of stories told by the Buddha and his disciples, or those that were composed during the religion's spread. These would include the *sūtras* of course, most of which are presented as narratives, along with *avadānas* ("noble deeds," tales of meritorious deeds performed by model individuals in past lives) and *jātakas*. Todd Lewis in his study of the Newar Buddhist community in Nepal observes that these sorts of popular narratives have been crucial to the domestication and localization of Buddhism in different cultural settings. Such religious folklore typically finds wide audiences through public retellings, often in the context of religious festivals and ritual performances. These stories have been the basis for artistic retellings (carvings, paintings) on Buddhist monuments and temples, and evidence suggests that such narratives were popular with monastics as well as laity.[25]

The fundamental role of narrative within Buddhism fits with what various scholars have pointed out in recent decades. Psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that human beings mainly organize our experience and our memory in the form of narratives (stories, myths, etc.), and that such narrative versions of reality are governed more by convention and "narrative necessity" rather than empirical verification and logic.[26] Indeed, narrative is a universal aspect of human life found in every society. Communication scholar Walter Fisher goes so far as to define humanity as in essence *homo narrans* ("story-telling man"), a being whose paradigmatic way of understanding is through stories, symbolic interpretations of the world that occur within time and that are shaped by history, culture, and character.[27] We can, thus, speak of narrative as a form of knowledge,[28] albeit one that differs from the objective logico-scientific form of knowing that has dominated the modern West.

The connection between narrative and religion is most obvious in the importance of myths to sacred traditions. Myths (*mythos*, "story" or "plot") are not "falsehoods" but are foundational stories that articulate a people's fundamental ideals and values. Myths convey a shared understanding of reality in story form. Theologian John H. Westerhoff reflects on this point, saying:

> We all need such a story. Stories are the means by which we see reality. Without a story it would appear as if we lived in an unreal world. Without a story we cannot live. . . Without a story life makes no sense. The story that is foundational to our life provides us with the basis for our perceptions and our faith. Faith is manifested in story; story communicates faith. . . . Stories are the imaginative way of ordering our experience.[29]

Myths, like all stories, are a primary way of constructing and establishing our reality. They dramatize our understanding but rarely in a clear, distinct fashion. This is why we keep returning to such stories, retelling them to re-affirm or even find new meaning.

A religion such as Buddhism lives in the sharing and passing down of such mythic stories (including their ritual enactments). By retelling and reimagining its foundational narratives over time, a community continues to engage with its shared body of texts, finding meaning in them down through generations. Moreover, questions about the historical accuracy of such stories (a concern that continually plagues Western scholars) rarely arise in these traditional contexts. Rita Gross has discovered in her experiences teaching Buddhist history to Buddhist communities that issues of historicity are in many respects beside

**25** Lewis, *Popular*, 2-7.
**26** Bruner, "The Narrative," 4.
**27** Fisher, *Human Communication*.
**28** Etymologically, the word "narrative" derives from the Latin *gnarus* which, in turn, stems from the Indo-European root *gnu*, "to know."
**29** Westerhoff, *A Pilgrim People*, 3-4.

the point when we engage with these tales *as stories* presenting Buddhist teachings. As Gross insightfully notes, from a thoughtful Buddhist perspective that seeks to be open to Dhamma in whatever form it may take, "Truth reveals itself in deep contemplation of stories and statements."[30]

The tremendous malleability of Aṅgulimāla's story suggests that the issues and themes surrounding violence and *ahiṃsā* at the center of this tale do not lend themselves to resolution through rational argument and definitive doctrinal statements. Narrative engagement ("storytelling") provides an alternative path, an idea that resonates with traditional Buddhist approaches to ethical issues. Steven Jenkins notes this fact in his own studies of Buddhism and violence, observing "Buddhist ethical thought . . . tends to embrace ambiguity by expressing its ethical instincts in narrative, rather than systematically distilling clarifying principles as a Western theologian might. Understanding Buddhist ethics therefore requires a high tolerance for ambiguity, which tends to be foreign to Western philosophical and academic practice."[31] Narrative, rather, is a way of knowing that does not entail objective, arms-length analysis so much as coherence and a "ringing true" to the experience of those who receive (hear, read) it. Thus, a narrative must be fluid and flexible, open to being construed in diverse ways.

Focusing on the tale of Aṅgulimāla (particularly in its canonical versions) *as a story* can open up new perspectives and enable us to see how ideologies of violence and non-violence inform Buddhist tradition, often in surprising and counter-intuitive ways. We can, thus, consider the composing and re-composing of narratives such as we see with the tale of Buddha and Aṅgulimāla as a perpetual attempt to make sense of human existence, an otherwise confusing, random, and even contradictory series of experiences: life, death, joy, sorrow, love, hate, peace, violence. In creating a story, we impose order onto the stream of experience, making it understandable in concrete, personal terms. Such creative ways of making meaning often strongly contrast with more linear, analytic reasoning. Moreover, unlike an analytic approach that seeks to resolve the matter at hand, telling and retelling stories is an on-going process that can never be complete since the life of a community and its traditions inevitably evades final closure.

Literary theorists provide additional tools for understanding what is going on in the narrations of Aṅgulimāla's story. Paul Ricoeur's view of narrative as an emplotment of various pieces into a coherent, temporally structured whole is particularly useful here. Donald E. Polkinghorne explains that,

> Emplotment transforms a list or sequence of disconnected events into a unified story with a point or theme. . . Without the recognition of significance conferred by being taken up into a plot, each event would appear as discontinuous, and its meaning would be limited to its categorical identification or its spatiotemporal location. Emplotment is the means by which narrators weave together the complex of events into a single story.[32]

That is, we create a story by emplotting a series of events within a larger frame ("plot"), thereby constructing an understandable and meaningful whole. Such emplotment, though, will always be a rather rough process rather than a tidy one.

Viewing the tale of Aṅgulimāla as the product of emplotment reminds us that the story in any of its various versions is always an artificial configuration that likely includes pieces that upon inspection don't quite fit. This realization can help us more clearly see how specific events within the tale run counter to neat but rather simplistic interpretations of Buddhist ethical teachings. In the story the Buddha behaves in ways that seem dishonest, even illegal. As we have noted, he basically overrules King Pasenadi in the latter's quest to bring the criminal to justice, essentially tricking him into giving up his hunt for the brigand (and even prompting the king to offer to pay for "Brother Aṅgulimāla's" upkeep). Usurping royal authority and engaging in deceit (whether deliberately lying or merely hiding the full truth) are not generally actions promoting the common good. In fact, they typically cause harm to individuals and groups, i.e. they violate the fundamental precept of *ahiṃsā*. More to the point, the Buddha's actions violate what Andre Bareau describes as the "equilibrium of forces" between the Buddha's spiritual authority and the worldly concerns

**30** Gross, "Historical consciousness."
**31** Jenkins, "Buddhist Ethics."
**32** Polkinghorne, "Narrative," 141.

of rulers – essentially a general agreement that Buddha would not interfere in political affairs.[33] Nonetheless these acts may make sense in the larger context of the story (particularly in more detailed popular versions or when we take a more Mahāyāna view stressing *upāya* and Buddha's limitless compassion). The Buddha violates *ahiṃsā* in its most technical sense (the "letter of the Dhamma") but acts in accord with the spirit of *ahiṃsā* to further the well-being of those within his charge, and society at large. Certain details jar our sensibilities when we examine them closely but viewed within the larger narrative frame, perhaps Buddha's actions are for the greater good.

As a story, the tale of the Buddha and Aṅgulimāla resonates with other stories having similar structures. One of the most obvious such story types is the seemingly universal "hero myth," popularly associated with the work of comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell. According to Campbell, all sacred stories are variations of the one archetypal hero tale and, in fact, Campbell even singles out the Buddha is a prime exemplar of the hero archetype.[34] And in truth, we readily see Buddha's heroic qualities in this story: he subdues the criminal through his wisdom and power, and even guides him through his redemption. But there is something darker at work here. The Buddha *is* a hero but he must use force (his "super-powers") and through it all displays a curious (callous?) disregard for Aṅgulimāla's many victims or their families. Ironically, Aṅgulimāla is a hero as well – attaining *arahant* status (a truly heroic feat) as well as becoming a "Dhamma protector" by helping the pregnant woman and establishing the *paritta*. Yet in his pre-monastic life, he was a true villain (an *antihero*) allied with the "dark side" who used his considerable powers to terrorize an entire region. Could it be, though, that it is precisely his violent history that suits him to his heroic role? This raises an important question: is the hero essentially violent?[35]

Interpreting this story of Buddha and Aṅgulimāla as a complex version of the universal hero myth, though, forces use to confront a disturbing aspect of hero myth (at least in Campbell's presentation): it always has violence at its core.[36] Hero tales wherever we find them invariably sanction violence, and never question the necessity of using force, at least at certain times. If the story of Buddha and Aṅgulimāla is a hero myth, then it sanctions violence even among those who have dedicated themselves to the religious life. At best, the story suggests that we should recognize violence rather than ignore it, and act (perhaps violently) to deflect, curb and/or channel it. Seen in this light, the story of Buddha and Aṅgulimāla is a narrativized way Buddhists have of acknowledging and dealing with what historian James Carroll dubs "the paradox of violence-in-the-name-of-stopping-violence," a perennial issue in societies throughout history.[37]

Narratively speaking, the story of Buddha and Aṅgulimāla depicts *ahiṃsā* as a way to reconcile the demands of compassion and peace with law and order, but this reconciliation is unstable and shot through with irony. The Buddha puts down a violent threat, seemingly restoring peace and prosperity, but this requires him to use supernatural force and to violate basic socio-political norms. That is, the Buddha enforces social order, acting in accord with the duty (*dhamma*) of a member of the *kṣatriya* (warrior/ruler) caste into which he had been born, a duty rooted in Vedic creation myth. However, he renounced such duties when embarking on the *samaṇa* path years before. In this case, the duty of restoring order belongs to King Pasenadi yet the Buddha overrules him. Moreover, the "peace" Buddha achieves is incomplete since Aṅgulimāla's victims are essentially ignored and the survivors' injuries and losses are barely acknowledged. Physically, the criminal's violent career has been stopped through Buddha's "gentle violence," and while Aṅgulimāla himself suffers violence as a consequence of his deeds, his punishment is not in proportion to his crimes. Our expectations of justice have been violated. Given these disturbing details, then, it is not surprising that we should find a contemporary retelling of the story that addresses these very concerns.

**33** Bareau, "Le Bouddha," 39.

**34** Campbell, *The Hero*, 31-34 and 361-364.

**35** That is, Aṅgulimāla's strength and martial skills enable him to withstand the rigorous asceticism of the *arahant* path better than his more peaceful brethren, and can be put to good use in warding off demonic forces from the weaker members of the *saṅgha* (e.g. ordinary householders and especially pregnant women).

**36** Derry, "Believing," 199.

**37** Carroll, *Jerusalem*, 44.

## Aṅgulimāla re-envisioned – *The Buddha and the Terrorist*

Perhaps the most intriguing of all recent versions of the story is the short book by peace activist Satish Kumar, *The Buddha and the Terrorist*, in which the author retells Aṅgulimāla's story in order to address the Global War on Terror.[38] Kumar's version merits careful attention for the ways he reshapes the narrative, combining various accounts (including the version he learned as a boy, in which Aṅgulimāla was born an "untouchable") with an expressly two-fold aim: to show a more effective way to counter terror than the militarized approach favored by most world leaders, and to introduce Buddhist teachings through narrative. As Kumar says, "In our troubled times we need to be courageous, creative, and compassionate, and to exercise our imagination in order to build a better future. Therefore the story of Angulimala is as relevant today as ever."[39]

Among the changes Kumar makes to the story are the addition of several new characters: Nandini, a devout and thoughtful *upāsikā* (lay woman), Sujata, a widow whose husband was slain by Aṅgulimāla, and Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism. King Pasenadi is a more important character in Kumar's book than in more traditional versions of the story as well, becoming a model of concerned but calm, rational leadership. When confronted by enraged subjects demanding violent punishment of Aṅgulimāla and the Buddha, he listens to them before pointing out that their calls for blood cannot return their loved ones to life, and that the Buddha's actions are more effective than seeking vengeance through the use of state power. He then says,

> "Citizens, this is the first time I have come across a terrorist who sees the error of his ways and actually renounces crime. . . As Angulimala changed from being a terrorist to a monk, I changed from being a giver of harsh punishments to a compassionate King. Yes, my citizens, I have seen a new light. I have changed. . . It would be easy to declare the Buddha an accomplice and not only arrest Angulimala but also to arrest the Buddha himself – accusing him of being a protector of terrorists, of aiding and abetting terrorism. That would be easy. Neither the Buddha nor Angulimala have any defenses, whereas my army is well equipped – the strongest and most powerful. Yet now I see the world differently. I see we need more Buddhas and more monks rather than more soldiers, more police, more prisons."[40]

Pasenadi instead calls for a formal audience in which Aṅgulimāla and the Buddha will face the villagers and the entire royal court, admit to their deeds and apologize to all those present, after which the entire assembly will deliberate on what further actions should be taken. Not surprisingly, the "trial" is quite dramatic, with the assembly finally opting for amnesty. The story ends with the Buddha, Aṅgulimāla (pointedly referred to from now on as "Ahiṃsaka," as in the verses from the *Theragāthā*), the king, and all citizens working to create a just society, sharing resources equitably and seeking to eradicate caste discrimination.[41]

Of particular note in Kumar's version of this story is his use of the label "terrorist" for Aṅgulimāla, rather than the traditional Indic terms such as *ḍākū* or *ḍakait* ("armed robber" or "brigand"). The terms "terrorist" and the "brigand" both challenge the state's monopoly on violence, and so threaten the social order, but they differ in important ways. Generally speaking, a "brigand" commits violence motivated by personal gain and/or plain malice. The actions of a "brigand," thus, are selfish and unprincipled, making him a threat to the social order and anyone he comes across. "Terrorist," however, is a more ambiguous and contentious term, as witnessed by the cliché "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Like a "brigand," a "terrorist" commits violence albeit not necessarily indiscriminately, since acts of "terrorism" generally have political (rather than strictly selfish) aims.[42] Thus a "terrorist" may be acting based on ethical principles and so, while a threat to the social order (even more so than a brigand), he

**38** Kumar, *The Buddha*.
**39** Ibid., 3. Note that Kumar does not use diacritics for names and terms.
**40** Ibid., 83-84.
**41** Ibid., 105.
**42** Armstrong, *Fields of Blood*, 343-344.

may *not* be a threat to ordinary people. Oppressed people may even regard a "terrorist" as their hero, since he is fighting forces that have harmed them as well.[43] The label "terrorist" may not fit Aṅgulimāla perfectly but in Kumar's version of the story, his actions do have a political dimension as a lashing out against the endemic structural violence of an unjust social order that has victimized many people. In this light, Aṅgulimāla's reign of terror may be "good" in the long run, particularly when we consider the outcome of this version of the story: a peaceful and truly just society. Could Aṅgulimāla's violence be in keeping with *ahiṃsā*?

In a related vein, during the "trial," Kumar has Mahāvīra explain to the assembly that Aṅgulimāla's crimes reflect the structural violence pervading their society, and thus draw attention to a situation in dire need of reform. However, Mahāvīra's words prove too radical for the crowd, who are violently upset at what they (rightly) perceive as an indictment of their way of life. At this point, the Buddha calms the crowd by reminding them of the importance of the task at hand. As he says, "We are faced with some vital questions and we are not afraid to seek right answers. . . Only through change do we grow and evolve, so let us not be afraid of change."[44] He then suggests a middle way between the entrenched socio-political violence of the status quo and Mahāvīra's strict ethic of nonviolence. In Kumar's version, the Buddha's notion of *ahiṃsā* proves more realistic than the Jain's, offering a more attainable social ideal.

All told, by adding new characters and scenes, Kumar re-shapes and complicates the plot in ways that both confirm and challenge traditional understandings of justice, peace, violence, and Buddhist teachings. While he may violate the conventional parameters of the tale, in so doing he reveals some of the nuances of the Dhamma, encouraging readers to think more deeply. In this light Satish Kumar's rendering of the tale in *The Buddha and the Terrorist* is *not* a distortion but a powerful example of how the story, with its twin themes of violence and *ahiṃsā*, calls us to re-engage with the complexities surrounding such topics. Similar narrative dynamics are also at work in stories about Maurya Asoka, and thus merit attention as well.

## Asoka – rule by "peaceful violence"

Few people would dispute that one of the most significant figures in ancient India was King Asoka, who united most of present-day India under the Mauryan Empire. According to surviving records (among them a series of edicts carved in pillars and cliff faces throughout his realm), Asoka promoted the Dhamma and even embarked on "Dhammic conquests" rather than military conquests for imperial gain.[45] Something of a "standard myth" has emerged in Western depictions of Asoka, in which he has become an exemplar of "enlightened politics."[46] British writer H. G. Wells praises Asoka, noting, "From the Volga to Japan, his name is still honoured. China, Tibet, and even India, though it has left his doctrine, preserve the tradition of his greatness. More living men cherish his memory today than ever have heard the names of Constantine or Charlemagne."[47] Asoka thus personifies the *cakkavatin* ideal, and can be considered a royal counterpart to Śākyamuni and his *bhikkhus*.[48]

However, the reality behind such hagiography is more ambiguous. Several scholars view Asoka's use of religion as little more than political expediency, and even question whether his "Dhamma" was actually Buddhist. Certainly in accordance with Buddhist ethical teachings, Asoka did away with capital punishment but he maintained a standing army, and rigidly enforced the law. Early in his reign he slaughtered the inhabitants of the state of Kalinga, a smaller and more egalitarian state, and it was only after eliminating

**43** Cf. the reflections on Joseph Campbell and the "hero myth" above.

**44** Ibid., 97.

**45** For details of these inscriptions see Nikam and McKeon, *The Edicts*.

**46** See, for example, Thurman, "Edicts of Asoka," 111-119.

**47** Quoted in Strong, *The Legend*, 5.

**48** Recall the prophecy when Siddhartha was an infant that he would be either a world conquering king or a *saṁsāra* conquering sage. As Buddhist tradition develops these twin ideals continue to be upheld, with the Buddha becoming the ultimate personification of the latter and Aśoka the personification of the former.

this last "enemy threat" that he began to take Dhamma seriously. Afterwards, he formed a branch of government to oversee and enforce order in the *saṇgha*, significantly increasing royal power in religious matters. Moreover, despite his alleged tolerance, Asoka violently suppressed other religions such as Jainism during his reign.[49] It seems that Asoka's reign involved what human rights groups sometimes call "state terror," and his status as the ideal Buddhist monarch (particularly in Theravādin countries) should at the very least give supporters of Democracy pause.

Even more interesting, however, are the legendary accounts of Asoka's life composed over the centuries. Among the most interesting is the *Aśokāvadāna* ("Narrative of Aśoka"), a Sanskrit text written during the second century C.E. In this telling, the king hardly starts out as a model ruler but is a fearsome warrior who as a young prince puts down a violent rebellion in the city of Takṣaśilā and even slays the legitimate heir to the throne.[50] Upon his ascension, the new king personally beheads five hundred disrespectful ministers, and burns five hundred to death for expressing their distaste at his repulsive appearance, earning the epithet "Caṇḍāśoka" ("Aśoka the Fierce") from his subjects. Later he hires an equally brutal young man as his executioner and constructs a "beautiful gaol" for the latter's use – a building that is, in fact, a chamber designed for torturing prisoners based upon punishments inflicted in the various hell-realms.[51]

In this version of Asoka's story his "conversion" does not come from remorse at the slaughter of the Kalingas (who are not even mentioned in the text) but through a personal example: Samudra, an *arahant* who had fallen afoul the evil executioner, uses his supernatural powers to withstand various tortures in order to convert the king, rising into the sky and performing numerous miracles. In awe, the king begs forgiveness and vows to cover his realm in monuments (*stūpas*) to the faith. True to his word, Asoka becomes a great patron of the *saṇgha*, blanketing his realm with eighty-four thousand *stūpas* and earning the title "Dharmāśoka."[52]

Still, according to the *Aśokāvadāna* the king remains plagued by problems and often must resort to force. This tendency towards violence is most obvious in the king's later years, when Asoka sends his beloved son to put down a revolt in Takṣaśilā, recalling a similar event earlier in his life. However, the king is tricked by one of his queens (apparently jealous at his lavish support of the *sangha*) into ordering his son to be blinded. Upon learning of her treachery, he exacts a horrible revenge, burning her to death and, for good measure, executing the inhabitants of Takṣaśilā as well. Sometime later the king falls ill, becoming despondent at the prospect of not donating his entire wealth before his demise. The text never explicitly says so but it suggests that Asoka suffers a loss of power that is connected to his extravagant donations. For the remainder of his life his generosity is restrained by his ministers and heir, which only increases the king's misery. The text depicts the king's death very cursorily, noting that it comes after he vows to donate "the whole earth" (with the exception of the state treasury) to the *sangha*, seeking as his reward only "sovereignty over the mind."[53]

The text does not end with the king's death, however. The final section is very ambiguous, suggesting that Asoka's profligate patronage of Buddhism inspires his great-great grandson to make a name for himself by destroying his ancestor's monuments, and slaughtering thousands of monks. In due course, this new king and his army are slain by various *yakṣas* (spirit guardians associated with nature) sworn to protect the Dhamma. Thus Buddhism is saved but the Mauryan lineage comes to an ignominious end.[54]

The Asokan model of kingship, with all of its ambiguity regarding violence and *ahiṃsā*, influenced Buddhism's spread to Southeast Asia, playing a decisive role in political life well into the contemporary period.[55] The specter of Asoka haunts the infamous account of King Duttugämanu ("Gämanu the Fierce"), a 2nd century Sinhalese king who went to war against Hindu troops. According to some accounts, several

**49** Jones, *Blood* , 82.

**50** Other legends say that Asoka slew ninety-nine of his brothers to ensure his rise to the throne.

**51** Strong, *The Legend*, 204-213. The jail was modeled on details described in a Buddhist text, the *Bālapaṇḍita Sūtra* ("Sūtra on the Fool and the Wise Man") – one indication that Mauryan society was officially Buddhist.

**52** Ibid., 214-221.

**53** Ibid., 286-292.

**54** Ibid., 292-294.

**55** Modern Southeast Asian leaders portraying themselves as modern heirs to the Aśokan mantle include Prime Ministers U Nu (Burma), S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (Sri Lanka), and Pridi Phanomyong (Thailand).

*arahants* willingly sanctioned such actions, assuaging the king's guilt by informing him that the non-Buddhists he killed were no more than animals.[56] We find a similar example in early medieval China with Yao Xing (366-416), a "barbarian" ruler who brought the scholar-monk Kumārajīva to Chang'an as a "war trophy," making him "court chaplain" and head of the official translation bureau housed in the "Asoka compound" at the imperial palace.[57] It seems that actual Buddhist kings and monks, perhaps taking cues from the stories of Asoka and Aṅgulimāla, may at times have exceedingly flexible interpretations of *ahiṃsā*.

Despite obvious differences (Asoka dies despondent and his legacy are all but wiped out while Aṅgulimāla attains *nirvanic* bliss and continues to support the Dhamma posthumously through his *paritta*) there are distinct parallels between the stories of Asoka and Aṅgulimāla. In both cases we have extraordinarily violent figures terrorizing large populations. Both figures have confrontations with holy men who convert them through supernatural force, with both becoming great devotees (lay and monastic respectively). Yet violence continues to intrude in these lives dedicated to *ahiṃsā*. Charles Drekmeier notes that Buddhist legends dramatize transformations wrought by the Dhamma on important characters, both exaggerating their violence *before* their "conversions" and their peacefulness afterwards.[58] In addition, name changes reflect the personality changes the characters undergo, rhetorically underscoring the switch from violence to a more peaceful life. In the *Aśokāvadāna* the king goes from "Caṇḍāśoka" to "Dharmāśoka" after publically proclaiming his faith and constructing lavish monuments throughout his realm.[59] Similarly, Aṅgulimāla earns his grisly epithet only after beginning his criminal life, taking the name "Ahiṃsaka" only after committing to monastic life. Thus, both stories depict their characters leading violent lives who, despite their religious devotion, continue to struggle with violence and its lingering effects. Both stories also focus on specific individuals, encouraging a personalized interpretation of *ahiṃsā* (people should avoid causing harm to each other) rather than a teaching that calls into question the pervasive violence built into the larger social structure.

As with Aṅgulimāla, so there are many versions of Asoka's story, again suggesting uneasiness with the notion of *ahiṃsā* and how it is to be enacted in life that calls for continual grappling through narrative. These issues seem to be particularly acute when in non-monastic settings, portraying major differences in adherence to and interpretations of *ahiṃsā* among laity and monastics. While both Asoka and Aṅgulimāla embrace the Dhamma and its ethic of *ahiṃsā*, they do not cut themselves off from the continuing repercussions of violence. More significantly, neither Asoka nor the reformed-murderer-turned-monk truly renounce violence so much as make more careful use of it than in their previous lives.

## Concluding reflections

It is not surprising that closely reading Buddhist stories reveals ethical complexities surrounding *ahiṃsā*. Jacob Dalton in his studies of Tibetan Buddhism has identified a similar narrative struggle with violence in the foundational myths concerning the establishment of Buddhism in the "Land of Snows."[60] While *ahiṃsā* is central to Buddhist ethics none of the episodes in the stories of Asoka and Aṅgulimāla we have examined support interpretations of Buddhist notions of *ahiṃsā* as an absolute rejection of violence. As such, these narratives challenge us to engage critically and creatively and, in so doing, develop a more nuanced understanding of *ahiṃsā* and its place within Buddhism. The narratives of Asoka and Aṅgulimāla dramatize issues surrounding *ahiṃsā* without resolving them, requiring us to grapple with their implications. In fact, the story of Aṅgulimāla is more challenging because, unlike Asoka, he cannot excuse his actions via the traditional duties of the *kṣatriya*. Like the title character in Bruce Springsteen's "Outlaw Pete," Aṅgulimāla is an outlaw, killer, and a thief, even if, as in popular versions of his story, he felt driven to violence by circumstances beyond his control.

**56** Geiger, *The Mahāvamsa*.

**57** Thompson, *Understanding Prajñā*, 79 and 95-96.

**58** Drekmeier, *Kingship*, 173.

**59** In his edicts, which were erected after his "conversion" following his victory over the Kalingas, Asoka refers to himself as Devānāmpriya ("beloved of the gods") and Priyadaśin ("he who regards everyone with affection").

**60** Dalton, *The Taming*.

All of these considerations of Aṅgulimāla's story reflect the real historical fact of the continual retelling of the tale in different contexts. By taking this process seriously, we remain faithful to the narrative intention animating Buddhism, and exemplified by the tradition of Buddhists composing different versions of the life of the historical Buddha as well. As some scholars note, such retellings are not mere repetition of "the same thing" but serve various ends: presenting Buddha as an epic hero, inspiring faith, creating models for emulation, etc.[61] This process of telling and retelling is the life blood of Buddhism, revealing how the tradition understands itself by revisiting its cherished stories. The tale of the Buddha and Aṅgulimāla remains one of the most striking yet unsettling of Buddhist tales, as it consistently resists attempts at finalization. Following Ricoeur, I would say that the failure to reach a definitive interpretation of this story points not to the impossibility of finding meaning in this tale but a surplus of meaning, much as we find with all symbol and metaphors.[62] Thus, rather than being a simple Buddhist morality tale promoting peace, the story of Aṅgulimāla proves to be a complex and paradoxical narrative. This story speaks to people, Buddhist and Non-Buddhist, through the centuries in a variety of ways. Most of all, this story calls us to wrestle with the notion of *ahiṃsā* – what it may and may not entail – without stipulating a final definitive meaning.

As I have indicated, most constructions of Buddhism, popular or scholarly, stress its teachings of non-violence. For example, in one introductory textbook on Buddhism in the section on ethics we read, "The first precept, regarded as the most important, is the resolution not to kill or injure any human, animal, bird, fish or insect. While this has not meant that most Buddhists have been pacifists, pacifism has been the ideal."[63] How are we to reconcile such pronouncements, though, with the history of violent acts committed in the name of the Dhamma as well as canonical texts such as the *Aṅgulimāla Sutta*? Clues from narrative studies help us see Buddhism itself as an on-going process of attempts to reconcile such contradictory ideas.

Taking seriously the tale of Aṅgulimāla as a continually contested series of narratives raises questions about *ahiṃsā* in Buddhism, and to what extent we should equate this ideal with "non-violence." Could actions in accord with *ahiṃsā* be violent, at least in certain situations? Even in the cynical 21st century some progressives and activists maintain that of all world religions, Buddhism offers the best hope for forging a global ethic. And with an array of prominent Buddhists – Thich Nhat Hanh, Aung San Ssu Kyi, the current Dalai Lama (to say nothing of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship) – advocating non-violent approaches to various contemporary problems (economic inequality, conflicts over scarce resources, social and ecological disruption due to climate change, etc.), it is little wonder that people look to Buddhism for guidance. However, Buddhist views of *ahiṃsā* are neither clear nor distinct, and as such, should give us pause before concluding that Buddhism always promotes non-violence.

The story of Aṅgulimāla, disturbing and compelling as it is, resists simplistic understanding; it is a narrative that portrays Buddhist ideals but not in a final, definitive fashion. It is mythic (an archetypal tale dramatizing central Buddhist values), lending itself to continual retellings and re-imaginings, but refuses to let us fix Dhamma once and for all. More to the point, this story helps us understand *ahiṃsā* not as "non-violence" *per se* so much as an amorphous middle ground between the extremes of violence and non-violence. *Ahiṃsā*, after all, may best be translated "non-harming." As such, cultivating *ahiṃsā* means establishing a disposition to refrain from causing harm to the extent one can. In this perspective, Buddhist injunctions to act in accord with *ahiṃsā* are not absolute commands so much as practical guidelines supporting the Eightfold Path's call to "right action." While this idea may not sit well with those who proclaim Buddhism is a "religion of peace," it may help us consider the extent to which the Dharma may point towards a viable (if not "perfect") ethics for our world.

Stephen Asma, who writes thoughtful popular books on Buddhism, offers some interesting observations about *ahiṃsā* and the use of force. In his book *Why I am a Buddhist*, he notes how throughout much of Asia, Buddhism is a source of power: "The Buddha and the *dharma* also represent sources of strength. Power is necessary because life if a struggle. Even the ultimate goal of detached equanimity can only come after

**61** Robinson, Johnson, and Thanissaro, *Buddhist Religions*, 4-5.

**62** Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 55-57.

**63** Harvey, *An Introduction*, 202. To be fair, Harvey does note examples of Buddhists falling short of this pacifist ideal.

substantial struggle."[64] Such power comes with the implicit threat of harm. Asma then relates a parable told by Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda about a fierce fire-breathing dragon who, inspired by an encounter with a bodhisattva, takes the precepts and lives a completely nonviolent life. Soon he runs into problems, as the local children begin to torment him, causing him to fall gravely ill. When next he meets the bodhisattva, the dragon blames his suffering on his taking up the Dhamma. The monk, however, replies, "My son, if you have compassion, morality, and virtue, you must also have wisdom and intelligence. This is the way to protect yourself. The next time the children make you suffer, show them your fire. After that, they will trouble you no more."[65]

Note that the bodhisattva does not tell the dragon to attack the children but rather to respond to their attacks with a violent display. The bodhisattva admonishes the dragon to act according to *ahiṃsā* but this does not mean being either passive or pacifist; in fact, the bodhisattva *encourages* the dragon to threaten the children. Presumably, this will be effective. When we recall that Maha Ghosanada, the monk who tells the parable, survived Cambodia's notorious "Killing Fields" and now dedicates his life to the renewal of Cambodia through the life of Dhamma, we must conclude that *ahiṃsā* is more complex than we might have initially thought. Taking *ahiṃsā* seriously means, among other things, looking at how Buddhist tradition discusses and depicts it, not so much in doctrines and treatises but in stories – stories that inevitably get told again, and again, and again.

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**64** Asma, *Why I am*, 167.

**65** Ibid., 170.

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